

ARAB RELATIONS WITH MALABAR COAST FROM 9th TO 16th CENTURIES

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The present paper attempts to trace the relations of the Arabs with the Malabar coast from the 9th to the 16th centuries. The early phase of this relationship, based mainly on trade, is briefly discussed since many of these facts are fairly known. Attention is mainly given to the later phase when many Arabs settlers in the area engaged themselves in literacy, religious and other activities and produced an impressive corpus of Arabic literary, historical and religious works, many of which were acknowledged by scholars for their authenticity and importance. The West Coast of India was known as Malabar to the Arabs. Al-Biruni appears to have been the first to call the country by its proper name, Malabar.¹ Before him, Kosmos Indicopleustus (522-547) who, for the purpose of trade made voyages to India mentions a port named MALE, "where the pepper grows", on the West Coast of India which, he says, was frequented on account of its extensive trade in spices.² The word Malabar is therefore probably, in part at least, of foreign origin. The first two syllables are almost certainly the Dravidian word *Mala* (the hill of the mountain) and *Bar* is probably the Arabic word *Barr* (land or ground).³ From the time of Comos Indicopleustus down to the eleventh century A.D., the word Malabar was applied to the coast by the Arab navigators: and the seafaring population who flocked thither subsequently for pepper and other spices. Malabar, Manibar, Mulibar and Malabar were the various forms of the name, which meant the hilly or mountainous country, a name well suited to its configuration.⁴

RELATIONS WITH FOREIGN COUNTRIES:

The extensive coast and the availability of spices attracted foreign merchants to the Kerala coast from very early times. The Bible and early Greek and Roman writers bear testimony to this fact. Referring to Solomon's period the Old Testament says that in his period gold was obtained from *Ophir* and once in three years came the navy of *Tharshis* bringing gold, silver, ivory, apes and peacock. All these objects except gold were products of Malabar; and the Hebrew names for the last two objects, *Kapim* and *Tukim* are obviously the Tamil *Kavi* and *Thikai*. In view of this, it is not perhaps an altogether idle fancy which identifies *Ophir* with Beypore a port near Calicut at the mouth of the river of the same name which is famed for its auriferous

sands.⁶ The similarity again between the Greek names for rice (*onyza*), ginger (*zinziber*) cinnamon (*karpion*) and the Malayalam *Ari*, *Inchiver* and *Karpuram* indicates that trade existed in these articles between Greece and Malabar, the only part of India where all these products grow in abundance.⁷

TRADE WITH ROME

The conquest of Egypt by the Romans (about 30 BC) made them masters of the trade route to the East. Hippalus's discovery of the possibility of sailing straight across the Arabian sea by the aid of the South-West monsoon had in immense impact upon commerce in the first century A.D. For some centuries after the time of Ptolemy trade was carried on steadily with Roman Empire. The Peutingerian tables compiled in the third century A.D. mention that a considerable Roman settlement existed at Cranganore which was the greatest metropolis of trade on the coast. Roman coins which had found their way into Malabar during that period have been dug at various places on the West Coast. They belong to the reigns of Augustus, Tiberius, Claudius and Nero.⁸

TRADE WITH ARABIA

Historians are unanimous that Kerala had maritime relations with the Arabs since very early times. Sardar K.M. Panikkar says that from very early times Kerala had been in contact with the Arabian coast and that traders especially from Muscat and other centres of the Arabian Peninsula used to frequent the Malabar ports.⁹ Pepper, which was grown in Kerala alone until the Dutch spread its cultivation in Java, was an essential item for the people in the cold area.¹⁰ Mecca was on the trade route for goods from China, India and African coast in the south and from Damascus and Constantinople in the North. Arab merchants sailed to the coasts of India and Africa for trade.¹¹

Abu Zayd, the Arab traveller of the ninth century A.D., mentioned that "the Arabs of Oman take the carpenter's tool-box with them and go to the places where the coconut grows in abundance. First they cut down the tree and leave it to dry. When it is dry, they cut into planks. They weave ropes of coir. With this rope they tie the planks together and make them a vessel. They make its mast from the same wood. The sails are made of fibre. When the boat is ready, they take a cargo of coconuts and sail for Umman. They make huge profits in this trade".¹²

In his poem the pre-Islamic poet, Imral-Qays has compared the dry dung of the antelope to the pepper corns. He says: "There all about its yards, and away in the dry hollows you may see the dung of

antelopes scattered like pepper corns".¹³ It is sufficient proof for the availability of pepper in Arabia before Islam; and since pepper was available in Kerala alone at that time, it is clear that Arabs had contact with Kerala before Islam.

Goods were taken from the Indian coast to that of Yemen and from there passing along the Red sea coast, to Syria and thence to Europe, either directly from Syrian coast or via Egypt and Alexandria. The route passing from Yemen to Syria, through Hijaz, has been referred to in the Qur'an as *Imam Mubin* (a manifest road).¹⁴ The winter and summer journeys mentioned in the Holy Qur'an mean those made by the Quraysh on the highway called *Imam Mubin*.¹⁵

There were other reasons also for the Arab contact with Kerala. Ceylon was known to the Arabs on account of its pearl fisheries and trade in precious stones from very early times. The Arab merchants had made commerical establishments there centuries before the rise of Islam.¹⁶ This also led to the Arabs contact with Kerala.

RELATIONS WIHT MUSLIM ARABS:

When Islam spread over Arabia, its influence was felt immediately in Kerala also. The Muslim Arabs took up missionary work and strengthened their contact with the people of Kerala which led to the propagation of their faith, culture and language. Islam was making headway quite peacefully and without adopting jingoistic methods.¹⁷ Moreover Muslim Arabs came to India, not like the Christian colonies of Syrians, driven and persecuted from their homelands, but full of ardour of a new found religions and of the prestige of conquest and glory.¹⁸ Thus, the propagation of Islam played a significant role in the development of Arabic language in Kerala.

According to Commander K. Sreedharan: 'Arabs were known as sea-farers even before the birth of Islam, but they seem to have redoubled their efforts at oceanic commerce after the advent of Islam'.¹⁹ During Shri Vijaya-Chola age (11th century A.D.) the Arabs reached the zenith of maritime commerce, and by the end of the Hindu period they held a complete monopoly in over-seas trade. The take over of trade from the South Indian merchants by the Arab middle-men apparently came about the end of Chola power. The decline of Chola power had created a vacuum in overseas commerce and the Arabs steped in".

The Zamorins²⁰ (13th to 15th century A.D.) relations with the Arab traders became intimate and Calicut slowly attained a pre-eminence in trade of pepper and other spices which made it the greatest emporium on the West Coast. Gradually Muslims monopolised the

external trade of the coast. Malabar's pepper and cardamom and textiles, which were also in great demand, were shipped from the port. As a result, the Zamorins became one of the wealthiest rulers in India and the most powerful on the West Coast.

A Muslim inscription in Pantalayini Kollam in North Malabar dated Hijra 166 (752 A.D.) is sufficient evidence for it. With the growth of Arab commercial activity under the Caliphs, Malabar ports became popular among the traders of Muslim capitals. Numerous Arab travellers, most notable among whom are Ibn Khurdadbeh (256-272 AH/ 869-885 A.D.) and Abu Zayd of Zirag (304-AH/ 916 A.D.) speak of Malabar ports in their works.²¹

Referring to the conquest of Sind, the famous historian, Ahmad al Baladhuri (279 AH/892 A.D.) says: "Arab merchants frequented Ceylon on maritime activities. Some of the Muslim families had settled there for trade. When the senior members of them died, the native king sent the remaining ones to Hajjaj ibn Yusuf (115 AH/ 734 A.D.) the governor of Kufa with some beautiful presents for him. But the ship was plundered by pirates at Dhabil in Sind. On hearing this report, Hajjaj sent an army under Muhammad ibn Qasim who attacked Sindh in 91 A.H/710 A.D. This incident occurred during the reign of Caliph al-Walid ibn Abdul Malik ibn Marwan (86-96 AH/ 701-715 A.D). At about the same time Arab Muslims had settled in Malabar also."²²

The presence of Muslim groups in the different port-towns of Kerala, which were able to secure recognition of the governments in the country, is proved by the Tarisappalli Copper Plates (849 A.D.). One such group attested the grant in Arabic in Kufic characters, which included the names of eleven Muslims as witnesses viz., Maimun ibn Ibrahim, Muhammad ibn Main, Salih ibn Ali, Uthman ibn Ali Marziban, Muhammad ibn Yahya, Amr ibn Ibrahim, Ibrahim ibn al-Tayyi, Bakr ibn Mansur, Al-Qasim ibn Hamid, Mansur ibn Isa and Ismail ibn Yaqub.²³

Al Shykh Ahmad Zynal Din (1028 A.H. a native historian who has been trusted for the accuracy of his narratives, mentions about the conversion of a Keralite king to Islam in Arabia, who stayed there for a few years and subsequently died there in ninth century A.D.

The alone mentioned event some years after Malik Ibn Dinar and his family set out from Yamen to Malabar. Besides him, his party consisted of Malik ibn Habib, Sharaf ibn Malik and his wife Kumarieth with their ten sons (Habib, Muhammad, Ali, Husayn, Taqiy al-Din, Abd al-Rahman, Ibrahim, Zainab, Halimah and Tanirah). They were received most hospitably at Kodungalloor in Malabar and all facilities

were given to them. Mosques were constructed at Kodungalloor, Southern Kollam, Pandalayini, Chaliampara, Dharmadam, Sreekandapuram, Ezhumala, Kasargode, Mangalore and Pakanur, and Qazis were appointed in all these mosques.

After the construction of mosques and making necessary arrangements for their management, Malik ibn Dinar and Malik ibn Habib went to Arabia and visited the grave of the King at Sahr. From there Malik ibn Dinar went to Khurasan but Malik ibn Habib returned to Malabar and settled down with his family at Cannanore. He deputed his sons to look after the mosques constructed by them.

M.G.S. Narayanan points out that there is no reason to reject the tradition that the last Chera king embraced Islam, and went to Mecca. Since it finds a place not only in Muslim chronicles, but also in Hindu Brahminical chronicles like the Keralolpathi which need not be expected to concoct such a tale, which in no way enhances the prestige or further the interest of the Brahmic or Hindu population.²⁵

During the early centuries of the Hijra, the Arab contact was mainly with the rulers of the two cities of Cannanore and Calicut, whose prosperity depended mostly on the export trade in pepper and spices. This has been attested by all authorities. Ibn Batuta (779 A.H/1378 A.D.) declares that "the Moors of Malabar were extremely rich, that one of their leading merchants could purchase the whole freightage of such vessels as put in there and fit out others like them."²⁶ The Mammalis and Koya Musas whom the Portuguese encountered in the coast were merchant princes with whom Cairo and Damascus were as familiar as Calicut and Cannanore.²⁷

Arabs came to Kerala mainly for trade. The mission of Malik ibn Dinar and his family cannot be counted as an off shoot of the Arab trade relations. This mission was carried out on the request of the Keralite king mentioned above who is said to have given them letters addressed to local kings requesting them to give necessary help and endowments for constructing mosques at different centres. From 9th to 16th centuries foreign trade of the West Coast was the monopoly of the Arabs. Along with traders, Arab scholars also made their way to Kerala who settled here, established centres of Arabic learning and made their contributions to Arabic language and literature. Some of them, the Makhdums of Ponnani, the Qadi family of Calicut, the Ba Alavis of Mampuran and the Bukharis of Chawghat deserve special mention.

THE MAKHDUMS

The illustrious family of the Makhdums of Ponnani occupies a very

distinguished position among the Arabic scholars of Kerala. They are reputed for their erudition, piety, dedication and commitment to the cause of knowledge. That Ponnani, the centre established by them, was known as the "Mecca of Malabar" speaks well of their importance. This centre of advanced studies in Arabic was established by Shaykh Zayn al Din Ibn 'Ali (928 A.H) on whom the title Makhdum (worthy of respect and regard) was conferred for the first time. The Makhdums suffix the title "Maabari" to their names. Maabar is the Arabic name for Coromandel. The forefathers of the Makhdums came to Tamil Nadu from South Yemen. One of them settled in Maabar and the other at Kayalpattanam (both in Tamil Nadu). His grandfather Ahmad Al-Maabari shifted his residence from Maabar to Kochi where Zayn al-Din Ibn Ali was born in 871 A.H. Later the family shifted their residence to Ponnani. It was Zayn al-Din ibn Ali who constructed the big mosque of Ponnani which became a reputed centre for advanced studies in Arabic.

It was during the life time of Zayn al Din ibn Ali that the Portuguese stepped into Malabar soil. The Portuguese attitude towards the Arab traders was one of inveterate hostility. Their idea was to root out the trade of the Muslim Arabs and to destroy them as a race as far as possible. When captured, the most barbarous type of tortures were inflicted on them and they were either killed or made a slave.²⁸ Shaykh Zayn al Din rose to the occasion and composed a long poem instigating Muslims to fight against the alien rulers to save the mother-land and reminded them that it was their religious duty to do so. He has a good number of works in Arabic to his credit.

Another scholar of Makhdum family is Ahmad Zayn al Din ibn Muhammad al Ghazzali (1028 A.H) His work "Tuhfatul Mujahidin" earned for him international fame. It is the first authentic work on history of Kerala written by a Keralite and deals with the time of Portuguese arrival in Kerala in 1498 A.D. upto 1583 A.D. covering about eighty five years. It also deals with the history of the advent of Islam in Kerala and the condition of Muslims and the local people at that time. The fact that this work was translated into English by Rowlandson, the Persian interpreter at the Head Quarter of the army, Fort. St. George, as early as 1833 speaks well of its importance. Afterwards it was edited and rendered into Portuguese by David Lopes in 1898. The remarks made by Rowlandson deserve mention in this context: "It is creditable to the author that the testimony of the western authors establishes the fidelity of his narrative."²⁹ He has five other important works in Arabic.³⁰ This family has produced a good number of scholars who produced numerous works in Arabic.

THE QADIS OF CALICUT:

The family of the Qadis of Calicut had their origin from Malik ibn Habib who had migrated from Yemen. One of the mosques constructed by Malik ibn Dinar was at Chaliyam. Chaliyam is a coastal region about 8 km south of Calicut and was the headquarter of Calicut at that time. Afterwards the headquarter was shifted to Calicut. Before the development of Ponnani into a centre of advanced studies, that position was occupied by Calicut. This family imparted knowledge and contributed to the development of Arabic language and literature. The first work in Arabic composed on Kerala about which information is available now is: *Umdatul Ashhas Wa Nazhatul Ahbab* (support of the campanions and entertainment for the dear ones) written by Qadi Zayn al Din Ramadan ibn Qadi Musa al Shaliyati (899 A.H.). This book in four chapters deals with dogma, philosophy, prayers and hymns, reasons for poverty and prosperity and spiritual deeds. Many members of this family have produced a good number of works in Arabic. The most distinguished among them is Qadi Muhammad ibn Qadi Abdul Aziz (1025 A.H/1606 A.D.) He has more than fifty works to his credit, both big and small. His works belong to different disciplines³¹ like grammar, Tajwid, Tasawwuf, Fiqh etc. Most of his works are in verse. The most important among them is "Al-Fath Al Mubin" (The Great Victory) in history which describes the condition of Muslims under the Zamorin Rajas of Calicut and instigates them to fight against the foreign rulers. It also describes the atrocities that Muslims had to face under the Portuguese. This poem in 520 couplets has been published in the *Jawahirul Ashar* of Abdul Qadir al sadfari. The other famous scholars of this family are Qadi Abu Bakar ibn Qadi Ramadan, Qadi Abu Bakr ibn Muhy al Din (1301 AH), Qadi Muhy al Din ibn Ali (1266 AH) etc.

THE BA ALAVI FAMILY

Ba-Alavi is another Arab Family that came to Kerala from Yemen. Shaykh ibn Muhammad al Jafri (1222 AH) came to Calicut in 1159 A.H/ 1746 A.D. from Tarim in Hadramowt in Yemen. He was introduced to King Zomorin of Calicut by Qazi Muhy al Din the then Qazi of Calicut. The king received him with honour and respect and gave him necessary facilities to settle down at Kuttichira in Calicut. Shaykh ibn Muhammad al Jafri was a good scholar in Arabic and composed seven works including a few poems. The most important among them is *Kanz al-Baiahin* (written in 1199 AH). It invokes people to lead a righteous life. It also gives a detailed history of the Ahl al-Bait (Prophet's family). Another member of this family Sayed Fadil ibn Alavi who was born at Mampuram in Malappuram District in 1240

AH. Sayed Fadl was a great scholar and freedom-fighter. He composed a treatise entitled al-Sayful Battar (the cutting sword) and published it in 1306 AH instigating Muslims to fight against the British regime, as it was their religious duty do so. He has illustrated his statements with quotations from the Qur'an and the Hadith and also from works of later scholars. He took a leading role in the Cherur Revolt. This antagonised the British officials and he was banished to Istanbul in 1270 AH. He died there in 1318 AH. He had composed sixteen works in Arabic.

THE BUKHARIS

The Bukharis constitute another family of luminaries who came to Kerala from Bukhara in Samarcand. The first Sufi scholar of this family is Ahmad Jalaluddin Bukhari who came to Baliyapattom in Kannur Districts, was renowned for piety and scholarship and commanded respect and regard in the society. Sayyid Muhammad Moula of Kavara the island, born in 1144 AH/1724 AD was the fifth descendant of Jalaluddin Bukhari. It is reported that his activities extended from Mangalore to Trivandrum. A few scholars belonging to this family established centres of Arabic at Kadappuram near Chawghat in Trichur District. Sayyid Hamid ibn Muhammad (1352 AH) belongs to this family. His most important work is: *Matali al-Huda bi Matami'i Ihtida'* dealing with the history of the Sayyids with special reference to Bukharis.³³

There are certain other Arab families like the *Baramis* and who flourished in business in politics like the *Bafakis*. In short the role played by the Arab families who came and settled in Kerala and integrated with Kerala society is significant in the Socio, economic and cultural life of the region.

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